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# **Star of Africa**

Written by Scott Mariani

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SCOTT MARIANI

*Star of Africa*



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# STAR OF AFRICA

## *Prologue*

### *Salalah, Oman*

Hussein Al Bu Said stood at one of the tall, broad living room windows of his palatial residence and gazed out towards the sea front. The sunset was a mosaic of reds and purples and golds, cloaking its rich colours over the extended lawns and terraces of his property, reflecting gently off the surface of the pool behind the house, silhouetting the palm trees against the horizon. Beyond the landscaped gardens he could see the private marina where his yacht was moored, its sleek whiteness touched by the crimson of the setting sun.

Ice clinked in his crystal glass as he sipped from it. Pineapple juice, freshly pressed that day. Hussein was a loyal and devout Muslim who had never touched alcohol in his forty-four years. In other ways, he knew, he had not always proved himself to be such a virtuous man. But he tried. God knew he tried. Insha'Allah, he would always do the best thing for his family.

He smiled to himself as he listened to the sounds of his children playing in another room. Chakir had just turned twelve, his little sister Salma excitedly looking forward to her eighth birthday. He loved nothing more than to hear

their happy voices echoing through the big house. They were his life, and he gave them everything that he had been blessed with.

‘You look as if you’re very deep in thought,’ said another voice behind him. Hussein turned to see his wife Najila’s smiling face.

‘And you look very beautiful, my love,’ Hussein said as she came to join him at the window. Najila was wearing a long white dress and her black hair was loose around her shoulders. She put her arms around his neck, and they spent a few moments watching the darkening colours wash over the ocean.

Nobody had to tell Najila she was beautiful. She was his treasure, soulmate, best friend. Hussein was a dozen years older, but he kept in good shape for her and was still as lean and fit as the day he’d spotted her and decided she was the one to share his life with. They’d been married just weeks later. Hussein was also about twice as wealthy as he’d been then, even though he’d already been high up in Oman’s top twenty. Their home was filled with the exquisite things he loved to collect, but Najila was by far the most wonderful and precious.

Hussein set down his glass and held her tight. He kissed her. She laughed and squirmed gently out of his arms. ‘Not in the window,’ she said, glancing through the ten-foot pane in the direction of the cluster of buildings that were the staff residence where the security team lived. ‘The men will be watching us.’

‘I gave them the night off, remember?’ Hussein said. ‘It’s Jermar’s birthday. The three of them went into town to celebrate.’

‘You’re too nice to them. What’s the point of having security men if you let them go off partying all the time?’

Hussein smiled. 'All the more privacy for us.' He drew her in and kissed her again.

With typical timing, their embrace was interrupted by the twelve-year-old whirlwind that was Chakir blowing into the room, his sister tagging along in his wake. Chakir was clutching the handset for the remote controlled Ferrari, his favourite of the many toys he'd had as recent birthday presents. 'When can I get a real one, like yours?' he was always asking, to which his father always patiently replied, 'One day, Chakir, one day.'

'Please may we watch TV?' Chakir said.

Hussein knew Chakir was angling to see the latest Batman film on the Movie Channel. 'It's nearly time for dinner,' he replied. 'You can maybe watch it later, after your sister has gone to bed.'

Chakir looked disappointed. Salma pulled a face, too, and it was obvious that her brother had got her all worked up about seeing the movie.

Najila bent down and clasped both her daughter's hands. 'Why don't you go and look at that nice picture book your father bought you?'

'I can't find it,' Salma said. She had the same beautiful big dark eyes as her mother, and the same irresistible smile – when she wasn't pouting about not being allowed to watch TV.

Najila stroked her little heart-shaped face and was about to reply when a loud noise startled them all. It had come from inside the house.

Najila turned to Hussein with a frown. 'What was that?' Hussein shook his head. 'I don't know.'

'Did something fall over?'

Hussein thought that maybe a picture or a mirror had dropped off the wall in one of the house's many other rooms.

He didn't understand how that could happen. He started towards the living room door that opened through to the long passage leading the whole length of the house to the grand marble-floored entrance hall.

Then he stopped. And froze.

The door burst open. Three men he'd never seen before walked into the room. Europeans, from the look of them, or Americans. What was happening?

Najila let out a gasp. Her children ran to her, wide-eyed with sudden fear. She wrapped her arms protectively around them. Little Salma buried her face in her mother's side.

Without a word, the three intruders walked deeper into the living room. Hussein stepped forward to place himself squarely between them and his family. 'Who are you?' he challenged them furiously, in English. 'What are you doing in our home? Get out, before I call the police. You hear me?'

The oldest of the three men was the one in the middle, solid, muscular, not tall, in crisp jeans and a US-Air-Force-style jacket over a dark T-shirt. His hair was cut very short, and greying. Probably prematurely. He probably wasn't much older than Hussein, but he had a lot of mileage on him. His features were rough and pockmarked and his nose had been broken more than once in the past. A very tough, very collected individual. He was giving Hussein a dead-eyed stare, unimpressed by all the angry bluster. He reached inside the jacket and his hand came out with a gun. The men either side of him did the same thing.

Najila screamed and hugged her terrified children close to her. Hussein stared at the guns.

'Now, Mister Al Bu Said, this doesn't have to be hard,' said the greying-haired man. 'So let's take it easy and do it right, and we'll be out of here before you know it.' He had



an American accent. He was very clearly the boss out of the three.

‘I . . . What do you want?’ Hussein stammered.

‘I want item 227586,’ the man said calmly.

Hussein’s mind wheeled and whirled. How could these men even know about that? Then his eyes narrowed as it hit him. Fiedelholz and Goldstein. This was an inside job. Had to be. He should never have trusted those dirty Swiss dogs with his business. Now that he’d changed his mind about selling, the bastards were betraying him. It was unbelievable.

‘I don’t know what you’re talking about.’

The man sighed. ‘Sure you don’t. Oh well, I guess some people have to be difficult.’ And he shot Hussein in the left leg, just above the knee.

The blast of the pistol shot sounded like a bomb exploding. Najila screamed again as she watched her husband fall writhing to the floor, clutching his leg. Blood pumped from the wound onto the white wool carpet.

The other two men stepped over Hussein. One of them put a pistol to Najila’s head and the other grabbed hold of twelve-year-old Chakir and ripped him away from his mother. The boy kicked and struggled in the man’s grip, until a gun muzzle pressed hard against his cheek and he went rigid with terror.

‘Now, like I said,’ the older man went on casually, gazing down at the injured and bleeding Hussein, ‘this doesn’t have to be any harder than it needs to be. You got a safe, right? Course you do. Then I guess that’s where you’d be keeping it, huh?’ He reached down and grasped Hussein by the hair. ‘On your feet, Twinkletoes. Lead the way.’

‘Take what you want,’ Hussein gasped through clenched teeth as he struggled to his feet. The agony of his shattered

leg had him in a cold sweat and his heart felt as if it was going to explode. 'But please don't hurt my family.'

'The safe,' the man said.

'Tell this bitch to quit howling,' said the one with the gun to Najila's head. 'Or I'm going to put one in her eye.'

Hussein looked at his wife. 'It's going to be all right,' he assured her. 'Just do as they say.' Najila's cries fell to a whimper. She closed her eyes, tears streaming down her face, and clutched her trembling daughter even more tightly to her.

Hussein limped and staggered across the room, leaving a thick blood trail over the carpet. The safe was concealed behind a \$250,000 copy of a Jacques-Louis David oil painting on the living room wall, *The Death of Socrates*. It was a big wall, and it was a big painting, and it was a big safe too. Sweat was pouring into Hussein's eyes and he thought he was going to faint from the pain, but he managed to press the hidden catch that allowed the gilt frame to hinge away from the wall, revealing the steel door and digital keypad panel behind it. With a bloody finger he stabbed out the twelve-digit code and pressed ENTER, and the locks popped with a click. He swung the safe door open.

'Please,' he implored the leader of the three men. 'Take what's in there and leave us alone.'

'Oh, I'm going to take it, all right. Out of the way.' The grey-haired man shoved Hussein aside and Hussein fell back to the floor with a cry of pain as the man started searching the shelves of the safe. Stacks of cash and gold watches, business documents and contracts, he wasn't interested in. Just the one item he was being paid to obtain.

He found it inside a leather-covered, velvet-lined box on the upper shelf. When he flipped the lid of the box and saw what was inside, his dead-eyed expression became one of amazement. You had to see it to believe it.

‘Bingo,’ he said. He took it out and weighed it in his hand for a second, keeping his back to the other two men so they couldn’t see what he was holding. He slipped it into the leather pouch he’d brought with him, then slipped the pouch into his pocket. It would be transferred to the locked briefcase later that night, before they got the hell out of Oman, never to return.

‘Now you have it, go,’ Hussein gasped. The agony was burning him up. He was losing blood so fast that he felt dizzy. The bullet must have clipped the artery. The white carpet all around where he lay was turning bright red.

The man stood over him, the gun dangling loose from his right hand. ‘Pleasure doing business with you, Mister Al Bu Said. We’ll be out of here in just a moment. One thing, before we go. I need to ask – you wouldn’t even dream of calling the cops and telling them all about this, now would you?’

‘No! Never! Please! Just go! I promise, no police.’

The man nodded to himself, and a thin little smile creased his lips. ‘Guess what? I don’t believe you.’

The gunshot drowned Najila’s scream of horror. Hussein Al Bu Said’s head dropped lifelessly to the blood-soaked floor with a bullet hole in the centre of his forehead.

Then the living room of the palatial family home resonated to another gunshot. Then two more. Then silence.

The men left the bodies where they lay, and made their exit into the falling night.

# Chapter 1

## *Paris*

It should have been a simple affair. But in his world, things that started out simple often didn't end up that way. That was how it had always been for him, and he'd long ago stopped questioning why. Some people had a talent for music, others for business. Ben Hope had a talent for trouble. Both attracting it, and fixing it.

Which was the reason he was sitting here now on this chilly, damp November afternoon, parked under a grey sky on this unusually empty street in the middle of this bustling city he both loved and hated, at the wheel of an Alpina BMW twin-turbo coupé that had seen better days, smoking his way through a fresh pack of Gauloises, watching the world go by and the pigeons strutting over the Parisian pavements and the entrance of the little grocery shop across the road, and counting down the minutes before trouble was inevitably about to walk back into his life.

He wouldn't have to wait much longer. It was thirteen minutes past three o'clock, which meant the deadline for Abdel's phone call had been and gone exactly thirteen minutes ago. Precisely as Ben had instructed Abdel to allow to happen. If the Romanians anywhere near lived up to

the image that was being painted of them, then such an act of open defiance would not be tolerated. They'd be here soon, ready to do business. And Ben would be ready to put the first phase of his plan into action. It might go smoothly, or then again it might not. That all depended entirely on how Dracul decided to play it. Either way, it wasn't exactly how Ben had planned on spending this brief return visit to Paris.

Naturally, things just couldn't be that simple.

When Abdel's broken deadline was twenty-one minutes old and Ben was two-thirds of the way through his next cigarette, the silver Mercedes-Benz turned sharply in out of the traffic and squealed up at the kerb outside the grocery shop, right across the street from where Ben was sitting. Both front doors opened at once. Two men got out, slammed their doors and converged on the pavement, glancing left and right.

Ben followed them with a watchful eye, and knew immediately that he was looking at the Romanians. They were both in their late twenties or early thirties. One was darker in hair and skin, with sharper features that hinted at gypsy ancestry. The other had more Slavic blood, or maybe Hungarian, with a long face and fairer hair. Ethnic variations aside, they could have been clones: big, heavy, hand-picked from the pages of the rent-a-thug catalogue, dressed to intimidate in leather jackets and big stompy boots and putting on a theatrical air of menace as they walked up to the shop entrance and pushed their way inside.

Dracul's enforcers, come to deliver on their promise of violence, bloodshed and broken bones. They looked more than up to the job. Little wonder they had Abdel and the rest of the neighbourhood spooked.

Ben took a last draw on his Gauloise, crushed the stub

into the crowded dashboard ashtray, picked up his bag from the passenger seat and got out of the car.

‘Here we go again,’ he muttered to himself. Then he crossed the street and walked into the shop after them.

It was Ben’s first visit to Paris in well over a year. He hadn’t been planning on coming back any time soon – not out of any kind of deliberate avoidance, but because he had few plans of any kind at all. For some time now, for reasons that he preferred not to dwell on, his had been a rootless, meandering existence that took him wherever chance and circumstance led him: he’d wandered aimlessly around Europe, never lingering long in one place, never quite sure why he’d come or where he was going next. He wasn’t a tourist, being fluent in the core European languages and conversant in most of the others, but he wasn’t a native either, and there seemed to be no place he could settle and feel at home. Sometimes he stayed a day here and there in cheap hotels; sometimes he roughed it in the kinds of solitary wild places he’d always liked to spend time, away from the complexities of life, away from hustle and bustle – most of all, away from trouble.

At least, that was the idea.

Jeff Dekker, Ben’s old friend and former partner, still ran the business they’d built together in Normandy, and still thought that Ben had lost his mind. Back in the day, Jeff had done his stint in the Special Boat Service, the Royal Navy’s equivalent of Ben’s old regiment, 22 SAS. Years later, after Ben had gone to live at the former farm near Valognes, a place called Le Val, he and Jeff had teamed up to carve out a prestigious niche for themselves teaching their specialised skills to military, security, law enforcement and anti-terrorist operatives from across the globe. They’d

reached the point in their careers where they could enjoy the fruits of all those years of extreme risk and back-breaking hardship.

That was how it worked in their world. Special Forces was like some kind of super-university where the learning curves were tough, the lifestyle tougher, the possibility of sudden violent death never far away, and the pay on a par with a schoolteacher's salary. But those who survived the experience ultimately emerged from it as life members of the most exclusive club in the world, with their real careers still ahead of them. Former SAS and SBS guys were in high demand for plum jobs as senior security advisors in Iraq, Afghanistan and elsewhere, with earning potential running into hundreds of thousands a year, tax-free, for a fraction of the workload they were used to, and virtually zero risk. Others did what Ben had done for several years after quitting the military, go freelance as what he'd termed a 'crisis response consultant', before Le Val had entered his life.

In short, for men of their qualifications it was a world of opportunity. Le Val certainly had paid off on everyone's expectations. So as far as Jeff was concerned, to have put yourself through the living hell they had, come through it alive and then invested all that hard-won knowledge and experience into the best private tactical training facility in Europe, just to abandon it and go wandering off into the sunset like some kind of half-arsed nomad, was completely nuts. It was an opinion he'd frequently expressed to Ben, in increasingly strong terms as it became increasingly apparent that Ben wasn't coming back.

Ben respected his old friend's point of view, and had always felt bad for having left Jeff holding the baby. But he felt he'd had no choice but to walk away from Le Val. Only

Ben understood the deep inner restlessness that troubled his soul and drove him to do the things he did.

Lately, though, a growing shadow of doubt had been hanging over him and Jeff's words were often in his mind. The trouble with walking away from a lucrative little enterprise like Le Val, with no other employment on the horizon, was that unless you were a millionaire it was no kind of an effective long-term financial proposition. And the Lord knew Ben Hope was no millionaire – never had been, never would be, never wanted to be. Technically speaking, he remained part-owner and a sleeping partner in the business, and could therefore be drawing an income from it if he'd so desired. But to Ben's mind, if he wasn't doing the work he didn't deserve to benefit from the profits, and had insisted on not receiving a penny from Le Val since the day he'd quit, choosing instead to support himself independently from his savings. He'd known, of course, that they wouldn't last forever, and he'd been careful. But the laws of simple economics couldn't be cheated, and slowly, slowly, his funds had dwindled away until worryingly little remained, leaving him to face some key decisions.

The first of those decisions was that he needed to sell his place in Paris. He'd occasionally toyed with the idea in the past, but now the time had finally come to put it on the market. The one-bedroom apartment had been a gift from a former client, years ago, and for a long time had served Ben as a base while travelling in Europe. He'd called it his safehouse, because it was so tucked away among a cluster of backstreet buildings that you'd never find it if you didn't know it was there. On more than one occasion, it had lived up to its name when he'd needed a place to lie low. But now it was nothing more than a pointless luxury, and a financial asset he could no longer afford to hang onto. Ben



had reckoned he could get it all fixed up himself, without having to spend a fortune. A patch-up repair here, a lick of paint there, and he was confident it could make an ideal pad for a single guy or gal, perhaps even a young couple looking to get into the property market.

And so, with some regret, Ben had come to Paris to do the necessary.

And that was when the trouble had started.